

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/3

Andy Roberts

Sitting In With Albert King

I wanna get funky, he sings. I wanna get down.

It is inconceivable that he will fail
at either. And though it's only opinion,
who would deliver the bad news to Albert King?

The only analogy that comes to mind
is sneaking up carefully to touch
a sleeping bear in the wild. Let's call it
a black bear to keep things simple.

A hot August afternoon in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

A sow asleep after gorging on blackberries.

Flies feasting on the wet lashes of her eyes.

The bear snoring. The flies buzzing, rising
with her breath. Hot wind hushing the tall grass.

A part of you can't believe you're doing this.

The other parts thrilled. Compelled.

This is actual magic. Creeping. One. Step. At a time.

The wind in your face. Good. The sow smells
sour. A hot dumpster. No twig cracks. Her chest
rises and falls. The flies rise. You reach out
your left hand. The wind dies. The flies land.

Your left index finger touches one stiff black hair
of her knee. Vomit rises in your throat
as you back away. One. Step. At a time.

You can't see the flies anymore. Just the bear
still sleeping. You're still walking backward.

Now you turn around. Turn your back
on the bear. Push down the vomit. Pick up
the pace. Begin to jog. Begin to sprint.

The power in you. The magic strong enough
to last a lifetime.

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Relentless

The creature with the battered skull walks across
the bottom of the ocean in weighted boots, like Frankenstein,
holding his breath for 39 days to the other side,
where he is greeted by the little girl with the basket of flowers.
He cracks a shy smile, throws her into the waves.

Then he removes his boots, moves over the mountain, across
the continent to the nearest city, where no one is alarmed
by his appearance. Is directed to the homeless camp
where screams wear mittens, where cold holds dominion,
where burghers dump their disease, tattoo open eyes
on closed eyelids. The creature feeds three days,
three nights. Walks across the desert wearing hands,
featherless wings that fail to lift, searching for the laboratory.
He finds the well poisoned, the laboratory abandoned
to dust, the tiny ones who rule, crawl, feast
on the nectar of his lashes. There is no father here
to strangle, then kiss. No grave, no sign,
just a black hole that goes down forever.

The monster tries to weep and fails.

Finds no rope long enough to lower himself
down, no limb to hang himself from.

The creature shambles east. After 36 days
sees a windmill on the far horizon.

A well where he drinks deeply
until a man with a shotgun intervenes.

The man is not his father. He kills him
anyway. The mitten slips off his scream,
villagers appear. Pitchforks and torches.

The monster searches the mob for his father,
lashing out in fury, chased into the mill
which is now burning. The mill going up
in flames, the creature trapped inside.

The creature roaring, ripping out his heart

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with his hands, holding it out as an offering
to the villagers ringing the inferno, howling with glee, everyone
hoping this will put an end to all the pain forever.

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The Greatest Generation

My mother's fourth husband, Frank,
was a member of the greatest generation.
He served in World War Two,
including six miserable months
puking deep down in the hold
of the USS Ticonderoga,
patrolling the South China Sea.
Frank got Mom to accept
Catholicism, take up golf,
eat only in Italian restaurants
where he knew the cook.

When Vietnam was winding down
but not yet over, I talked to Mom
about going to Canada to avoid the draft.
She hated the war too.
We watched Walter Conkrite
announce we'd been lied to
by the government of the United States of America.

I don't know what prompted her
redfaced announcement of my cowardice
last Thanksgiving.
I'd been bragging about
how I stood up to bullies
in the school yard in 1969,
when she declaimed in front of Frank
and everyone else at the table:
But you were too scared to go to Vietnam.

I thought my mother was on my side.
We watched Walter Conkrite take off his glasses,
level his gaze as the camera zoomed in.

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She was a member of the greatest generation
and I - the draft dodger, the conscientious objector,
the coward - was not.